

Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling by John Steven Gatto

Summary:

John Taylor Gatto has been a New York City schoolteacher for over twenty six years and was named New York State Teacher of the Year in 1991. His book is comprised of essays, speeches and commentaries that critique the national curriculum of schooling, stating that it prevents children from learning how to think and act and ultimately dumbs them down. Throughout the book, Gatto challenges the curriculum of compulsory schooling and presents his ideas for its transformation.

The first chapter is a speech given by Mr. Gatt entitled "The Seven-Lesson Schoolteacher." In this speech, he critiques what is taught in compulsory schools. Gatto presents seven lessons that are hidden in the curriculum of every school nationwide and that he consequently teaches. The first lesson is confusion. Gatto states that he teaches un-relations, disconnections and material that is out of context and fragmented. The second lesson is class position where students learn that they must stay in the class where they belong and that they must know their place. The third lesson is indifference. Students are taught not to care too much about anything. School bells enforce indifference and teach the lesson that no work is worth finishing. The fourth lesson is emotional dependency in which students give up their rights to authority. The fifth lesson, intellectual dependency, teaches students that they must wait for other people to make meaning out of their lives and that good people rely on experts who are better trained than themselves. The sixth lesson is provisional self-esteem in which children are taught that their self-respect should depend on expert opinion; that people need to be told what they are worth. Finally, the seventh lesson is that one can't hide, where children are taught that they are always under surveillance. Gatto goes on to say that that school prevents children from becoming active members of the community. He says that institutional school teaching is destructive to children and that these seven lessons are anti-educational. He presents the problems of this curriculum and expresses the need for immediate change.

Chapter 2 is a speech called "The Psychopathic School" which is our current school system according to Gatto. He outlines many things wrong with the system and why it isn't working and the changes that have to be implemented if we are ever to fix the problem. He writes about the breakdown of society. It is no longer community based but "network" based. The exclusion of children and the elderly have led us to a society of present dwellers, with no past and no future. Children are no longer allowed to think for themselves and are now dependent on outside sources of entertainment and structure to make sense of their lives. This dependency has led us on a slippery slope of "narcotic drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, and alcohol... lives devoted to buying things". Children becoming grown ups are usurped because of the time spent away from actual real world knowledge. School is also seen as antithetical to child-parent relationships. To correct the problem schooling has to be taken out of the classroom and put back into the communities. Children have to be self reliant and given the opportunity to trust themselves to further their own self knowledge and independence; which is the key to "success". Families have to be given space within the system that builds family unity. It is also time to hush the voices of the so-called "expert" who has advanced centralization.

Chapter 3 is an essay awarded first prize, Geraldine Dodge Foundation. In this essay Gatto explains why he became a teacher and what sustain him during his teaching career. The Green Monongahela about 40 miles south of Pittsburg was where Gatto grew. Gatto, became a teacher because the job he had, which

was making 30 second commercials for a production company served no purpose. He grew doll of his party lifestyle and decided to quit one day and pursue teaching junior high school in New York City. He quickly figured out that teaching the dummies and bad kids of New York City was no easy task. After three months the dismal working conditions, the ugly rooms, the torn books, the repeated instances of petty complaints from authorities, the bell, the buzzers, the drab teacher food in the cafeterias. It was one girl name Milagros who changed him because she wanted to learn. "A teacher like you cannot be found" that simple sentence made me a teacher for life. Gatto helped Milagros get to her right level class, and she later became an award winning teacher for Norman Thomas High School in New York City. Gatto journey to teach was a crazy one but he made the best out of it and helped as many kids as he could.

The next chapter is a speech entitled "We need less school, not more." Here Gatto shares the importance of a community. He feels that there are too many networks being created in which people do not have a sense of importance as an individual, and therefore cannot make real connections with one another. He says that these networks create vegetables, people that are all the same with no real purpose, and most importantly there is no sense of humanity. For example, you go to college and meet lots of people, but once you graduate you may not remember the names of some of those friends. You did not make a true community-type connection. He compares this to the chances of you forgetting the name of an aunt or uncle, which are slim. Your community is your family and they are the ones that you should be spending the most time with in order to make a true emotional connection. Gatto believes that the school system is taking away from people's ability to spend time with their families and gain a purpose for themselves. He believes that the focus has become overly geared towards "good education= good job, good money, good *things*." He feels that the true meaning of education is being lost in the schooling institutions, and that, simply put, children should have more time spent within their home communities than in a place that will make them even more disconnected from others.

The final chapter is a speech on "The Congregational Principle: The Beginning of an American Solution to Our School Problem." Gatto's last chapter focuses less on how schools got to be so bad, and more on what to do about the dismal state of education today. The title of the speech refers to how small communities in Colonial America were governed: the early settlers were distrustful of centralized authority, and the Congregational Principle evolved from Socrates' dialectic. Wikipedia defines dialectic as "controversy, Viz., the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments respectively advocating propositions and counter-propositions. The outcome of the exercise might not simply be the refutation of one of the relevant points of view, but a synthesis or combination of the opposing assertions..." From the 21st century viewpoint, Puritans seem uniformly drab. However, Gatto points out that the "Irony of Congregationalism" is that way of life demands individuality, not regimentation. Rather than turning the decision-making authority over to a powerful few priests, the Congregational Principle lets each individual be his own priest, and decide for himself. One of the facets of Congregationalism which seems harsh to modern minds is the exclusion of people. Towns could, and did, exclude people that wouldn't "fit in" (i.e. those of a different religion) in order to wind up with a group of people who had core values and beliefs. The dialectic would have collapsed under the strain of many opposing viewpoints, if the misfits weren't winnowed out. Gatto proposes divorcing the Congregational Principle from religion and applying it to fixing education. Some of his ideas include "encourage and underwrite experimentation, trust children and families to know what's best for themselves, stop segregation of children and the aged in walled compounds, involve everyone in the community in the education of the young; businesses, institutions, old people, whole families; look for local solutions and always accept a personal solution in place of a corporate one" (93). Gatto advocates change at a grassroots level rather than a top-down directive, and points to stalled integration of women and minorities into the work force as one example. Affirmative action would have been much more effective, he writes, as a force from the bottom up. He examines two ways of looking at the Education

System, 1. there is an engineering flaw that can be fixed "one right way", or 2. as a character in a courtroom drama where once the villains are prosecuted, the problems will be solved. Neither of these outlooks seems to hold as much promise for American Education as the Congregational Principle.

Key Terms:

- *Family-According to Gatto, each of us decides what family means in our own hearts and no one has the authority to establish a centralized definition for the word.
- *Indifference-Not caring too much about anything, turning on and off like a light switch when moving from one work to another. (Chapter 1)
- *Intellectual Dependency-Doing what you are told, relying on an expert to tell you what to do, being dependent on others.(Chapter 1)
- *Guerrilla School Program: every kid, rich and poor, smart and dippy, give 320 hours a year of hard community service. (Chapter 2)
- *Successful: people are independent, self-reliant, confident and individualistic. (Chapter 2)
- *Network – group in which there is no emotional payoff, essentially dividing people first from themselves, and then from each other. (Chapter 4)
- *Community- collection of family and friends that have complex relationships with meaning both in and out of the homestead. (Chapter 4)
- *Congregational Principle- the system of governance where each individual (church, person, community) is autonomous. (Chapter 5).
- *Dialectic- Socrates' teaching method; an exchange of arguments and counter-arguments that can find a solution in compromise. (Chapter 5)
- *Dummies: are student who can't read more than two words without stumbling. (Chapter 3)
- *Monongahela River: what keeps you going, instant motivation, and inspiration. (Chapter 3)

Key Passages:

- "Such a curriculum produces physical, moral and intellectual paralysis, and no curriculum of content will be sufficient to reverse its hideous effects." (Chapter 1 p15)
- "Through its hidden curriculum [school] prevents effective personality development." (Chapter 1 p19)
- "Our kids have no time left to grow up fully human and only thin-soil wastelands to do it in." (Chapter 1 p21)
- "Lessons cannot be learned in schools as they are. School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned." (Chapter 1 p21)
- "...without children and old people mixing in daily life, a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present." (Chapter 2 p22)
- "It's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing." (Chapter 2 p23)
- "Two institutions at present control our children's lives: television and schooling, in that order. Both of these reduce the real world of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice to a never-ending, nonstop abstraction." (Chapter 2 p25)
- "But no large-scale reform is ever going to work to repair our damaged children and our damaged society until we force open the idea of "school" to include *family* as the main engine of education." (Chapter 2 p33)

"In New York City we don't have school; we have pens for lost souls. Teaching is a scam, a welfare project for losers who can't do anything else." (Chapter 3 P 39)

"After three months the dismal working conditions, the ugly rooms, the torn books, the repeated instances of petty complaints from authorities, the bell, the buzzers, the drab teacher food in the cafeterias, the unpressed clothing, the inexplicable absence of conversation about children among the teacher had just done me in" (Chapter 3 P40)

"The answer is no!! I am never available to work in your Pigpen school!! (Chapter 3 p42)

"I suggest you test her, and if she isn't a dummy, get her out the class she in!" (Chapter 3 p44)

"A teacher like you cannot be found" that simple sentence made me a teacher for life. (Chapter 3 p 45)

"The feeding frenzy of formal schooling has already wounded us seriously in our ability to form families and communities, by bleeding away time we need with our children and our children need with us. That's why I say we need less school, not more." (Chapter 4 Pg 52)

"Discovering *meaning for yourself* as well as discovering satisfying *purpose for yourself*, is a big part of what education is. How this can be done by locking children away from the world is beyond me." (Chapter 4 Pg 62)

"Yet it appears to me as a schoolteacher that schools are already a major cause of weak families and weak communities. They separate parents and children from vital interaction with each other and from true curiosity about each other's lives. Schools stifle family originality by appropriating the critical time needed for any sound idea of family to develop- then they blame the family for its failure to be a family." (Chapter 4Pg 67)

"Perhaps it is time to try something different. 'Good fences make good neighbors,' said Robert Frost. The natural solution to learning to live together in a community is first to learn to live apart as individuals and as families. Only when you feel good about yourself can you feel good about others." (Chapter 4 Pg 71)

"Don't be panicked by scare tactics into surrendering your children to experts" (Chapter 5, Pg 93).

"People are less than whole unless they gather themselves voluntarily into groups of souls in harmony." (Chapter 5, Pg 87).

"Central planners of any period despise the dialectic because it gets in the way of efficiently broadcasting 'one right way' to do things: Half a century ago, Bertrand Russell remarked that the United States was the only major country on earth that deliberately avoided teaching it's children to think dialectically" (Chapter 5, Pg 76).

"Trust in families and neighborhoods and individuals to make sense of the important question 'What is Education For?' If some of them answer differently from what you might prefer, that's not really your business and it shouldn't be your problem. Our type of schooling has deliberately concealed the fact that such a question must be framed and not taken for granted if anything beyond a mockery of democracy is to be nurtured. It is illegitimate to have an expert answer that question for you." (Chapter 5, Pg 94)

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